

Hussain Ahmad Madni and Social Mobilisation of Muslims in Assam During Transfer of Power

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In the phase of the reconstruction of Muslim society which followed the Indian Mutiny of 1857, Muhammad Qasim Nanotawi (1832–80) and a group of '*Ulama*' (leading Muslim theologians) decided to establish a seminary at Deoband, a small town near Delhi, to conserve traditional theological learning and classes were opened in 1867. The objective of Deoband seminary, as envisaged by Nanotawi and his life-long associate Rashid Ahmad Gangohi (1828–1905), were to re-establish contact between the '*alim*' (singular of '*Ulama*') and the average Muslim, and to reorientate the Muslim community to its original cultural and religious identity. Medieval rational sciences (*Ma'qulat*) generally accepted in classical Muslim educational curricula were included as a bridge between medieval Islamic and modern western nationalism, so that a student, if he so wished, could join a modern school or university after completing his theological education at Deoband.

Judicial rulings on the problems referred to by members of the Muslims developed in 1893 into a Department of *ifta'* (juristic rulings). It covered a wide range of legalities, minutiae

of ritual, social, or political problems as well as decision of *panchayats* and official courts that came under the purview of Muslim Personal or Family Law.

Mahmud al-Hasan (1850–1927) is by far the most outstanding figure in the generation that followed Nanotawi and Gangohi. Under his direction Deoband achieved an international reputation and attracted students from other parts of the Islamic world.

Within the sub-continent it produced most of the great '*ulama*' of the second quarter of the twentieth century. Ashraf 'Ali Thanwi, who popularized traditional Islam among less educated and Hussain Ahmad Madni (1879–1957), who succeeded Mahmud al-Hasan as the Director of the Deoband seminary.¹

After his early education at Deoband, Hussain Ahmad lived in Hejaz (Mecca and Medina) from 1900 to 1920 and hence used the suffix Madni to his name. His socio-religious and political views were shaped apart from Deoband by the Jamiyat al-Ulama-i Hind, the religio-political organization of the Muslim Divines founded in 1919. Initially it was concerned to defend, in alliance with Indian National Congress, the Khilafat Movement, the holy places of Islam. In the post-Khilafat era, the Jamiyat, however, shed its pan-Islamic garb to emerge as a quasi-political body with a paid membership of about 200,000. It worked closely with the Congress, appearing in joint mass demonstrations. During the repressive period of the early 1930's at least 20,000 Jamiyat workers were at one time or another imprisoned for political offences. Hussain Ahmad Madni was deported to Malta along with Mahmud al-Hasan and others.

In the 1940s the *Jamiyat* opposed the two nation theory to champion secular, composite nationalism (*Mutahhida qaumiya*). Hussain Ahmad Madani, its prime leader, cited historical precedents, such as the covenant at Medina (*Mithaq-i Medina*) of the Prophet, who created unity of the inhabitants of Medina by assuring freedom of religious practice and equal rights to all irrespective of faith as justification for supporting India's nationalist movement. He urged that Indians regardless of their religion, were an invisible part of one Indian nation with one

homeland. In a recent work on D.R. Goyal has summed up the programme of Maulana Madni on the basis of his writings and speeches:

1. Unity must be forged if fight for independence has to be conducted by non-violent means, other means being beyond the reach of Indians.
2. Muslims must be motivated to participate in freedom struggle along with Hindus if they have to secure an honourable position in independent India.
3. Congress being the main instrument for the liberation struggle it should be strengthened and made sensitive to the religious sensibilities of Muslims. He himself joined it to set the example.²

A third and probably the most vital factor in shaping his views was his deputation by the Deoband seminary to the seminary of Sylhet in 1924 where he stayed in the first instance till 1928. It brought him in close and direct contact with the people of North Eastern region a contact which still looms large with his descendants. He writes why he chose to go Sylhet:³

People of Sylhet were pressing me for a year and a half to start giving lessons in *Hadith* or find another suitable person for the job because the thirty million Muslim population of the area is very backward in respect of education, particularly religious education. Their knowledge of *Hadith* is particularly poor. I was very busy after coming out of Ahmedabad gaol because the movement was showing signs of weakness. Therefore I delayed and tried to find another proper person. The need however had to be fulfilled because, in the absence of proper knowledge those people could be vulnerable to anti-Islam propaganda. The graduates of the area had secured degrees from Universities of Dacca or from Calcutta's *Madarsa 'Alia* but had not have the benefit of systematic study of *Hadith*.

At Sylhet, apart from his regular teaching assignment, he established contact with the Muslim masses, a cherished and avowed goal of the founders of Deoband. Here Shaykh-al Islam (an honorific title, which he received from people) Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani preached among people not only in

urban or semi-urban areas but in the distant rural areas as well, often walking on foot he continued his contact programme. Apart from being a teacher-preacher, he was also a sufi linked like most Deoband Divines to the Chishti -Sabiri order. By his efforts a sizeable section of Muslims came under his influence, many seminaries were established, the *Dar al-Uloom*, Baskandi being one such institution. It was here, that his son, Maulana Asad Madani, (died 6th February 2006) former chief of *Jamiyat al-Ulama* was born. One of his biographers record his movements in the region in a vivid manner:⁴

The villages of Bengal and Assam are invariably surrounded by rivers and rivulets but the Maulana (Hussain Ahmad) crossed all those hazards and brought to them the message divine. It sometimes happened that when he reached a particular place after negotiating all the difficulties there would be no more than seven or eight persons to listen to his lectures. The size of audience never disappointed him and he delivered his lecture to the tiny group with the same zeal and earnestness with which he used to address gatherings of thousands. He traveled mostly on foot and quite often returned to the residence late at night. His sincere and crusading spirit bore rich fruit and madrasas came up at various places. The people who were totally ignorant about their religious faith not only got acquainted with it but also became his disciples.

In 1928 he was called back to Deoband to take up as Director (*Muhta mim*) but he continued his visits in the region where he was now unrivalled as a *pir* and politically-minded leader of the Muslims. Educating them not only theology but also bringing socio-political awakening among them. In the crucial year of the referendum and subsequent partition, Maulana Madani made whirlwind and hectic tours in his areas of influence in the region refraining his followers from any otherwise decision except for composite nationalism. For his views he was even roughed up elsewhere.⁵

For the attainment of freedom Maulana Madni always exhorted Muslims to join hands with fellow citizens of other communities. He pointed out that India is the homeland of Muslims as much as that of other communities resident in the

land and their material and spiritual development is intimately related to the conditions that prevail here and argued that:⁶

All the financial, economic and social harm that is suffered by others is suffered in a greater measure by Muslims. Therefore it is as much the duty of Muslims to throw away the shackles of slavery as it is of other communities. The present government is no protector of human rights of Indians, nor does it bother about their country's welfare. It has no respect for their religious and national sentiments. Indians are given no respect either within India or outside. Other nations and governments also give no right to Indians because they are slaves. The government of India shows no concern for the trade, industry and education of Indians.

Maulana Madni had intense love for the country, his writings and speeches reflect his concern for the economic and political exploitation of India. In the Sylhet speech, for instance, he talked of the golden past of India when it was treated by the entire world as the source of knowledge and India was leader in the fields of arts, crafts and industries. And, he proceeds to demonstrate with the help of statistics how India's wealth and resources had been plundered, so much so that instead of exporting all variety of textiles the country was obliged to import textiles worth 60 crores every year.⁷

Hussain Ahmad Madni's contribution at the time of transfer of power, particularly in Assam has been grossly neglected by historians working on the subject. It has been argued recently that the Maulanas (Madni along with some others) were sidelined in the process of negotiation during the Transfer of Power.⁸ As the man of masses Maulana Madani played a historic role before and during the Transfer of Power (1947) in the region. He and his followers openly gave their views against the partition of India and adhered to the line taken by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad. They risked their lives during the referendum in Sylhet to organize demonstration and rallies for united India and United Assam. Madani called upon his followers to vote for Assam (India). The followers of Madani suffered violence of the pro-Pakistani groups and persecution of various sorts, but they voted for Assam (India). This explains how a section of Muslims voted for India in Sylhet Referendum.⁹ These Muslims, who

opposed partition and voted for India became the targets of attacks during and after referendum, and therefore, like the religious minorities a section of them also crossed over to other districts of undivided Assam after the referendum.¹⁰

Disgusted by the inevitability of partition, just on the eve of independence, Maulana Madani crossed over with a handful of followers from the Barak-Surma Valley to the side of Brahmaputra valley. He bought some land and busied himself in the rehabilitation of his followers. The followers became in course of time rich farmers and *agar* (aloe wood) growers. Today they constitute a sizable section of self-reliant economically sound population of the region. His efforts were all embracing, dissemination of religious education, economic reconstruction, social uplift and composite nationalism in the region and the country as a whole.

END NOTES

1. Mahbub Ridvi, *Tarikh-i Deoband* (Deoband, 1952), pp. 104–7, 386–7.
2. *Maulana Husain Ahmad Madni: A Biographical Study* (Delhi, 2004), pp. 146–47.
3. *Naqsh-i Hayat* (Autobiography of Hussain Ahmad Madni) (Deoband, 1999, [Reprint]), p. 143.
4. Syed Muhammad Miyan, *Asir-i Malta Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani*, Delhi, 1976; Farid al-wahidi, *Shaykh al-Islam Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madani* (Delhi, 1992), *Naqsh-Hayat, op. cit.*, pp. 127–29.
5. Farid al-Wahidi, *op. cit.*, p. 129; Msuhirul Hasan, *Legacy of a Divided Nation: India's Muslims Since Independence* (London, 1997), p. 94.
6. D.R. Goyal, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
9. J.B. Bhattacharjee, "Sylhet Referendum: Myth of Communal Voting", *Proceedings, IHC*, 1990, p. 654.
10. Traditions quite current in circle of disciples and followers of Maulana Madni have us believe that at the time of Referendum Maulana took promise from them to vote against Pakistan. It is still an enigma that despite their voting *en masse*, results of the election were otherwise and the inevitable happened. One such narrator of the tradition is Farid al-Wahidi, Maulana's grandnephew and biographer author of *Shaykh al-Islam Maulana Hussain Ahmad Madni* cited above.